Prince William Forest Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Prince William Forest Park
Triangle, Virginia

The Prince William County Poorhouse, 1794-1927

Poorhouse ruins, August 2002. The poorhouse was razed before the 1930s. (NPS Photograph)

Relieving Poverty in Prince William County

In 1792, the Overseers of the Poor for Prince William County directed Thomas Harrison and William Helm, two local landowners, to "contract for the Building [of] a poor House." The next year, the overseers issued new specifications: the poorhouse was to be "a framed House Sixteen Feet Square with a Stone or Brick Chimney Weather Boarded & Covered with Shingles . . . situated & built in Such Manner as they shall think best." This almshouse, which opened in 1794, together with later related buildings, housed the county's poorest until 1927 near Independent Hill, in the northwest of today's Prince William Forest Park.

Alms for the Poor in the Early Republic

When the American Revolution ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, aid for the poor differed in varying states. In New England, local governments provided sustenance for the poor; in Virginia, which recognized the Anglican Church as its official church, Anglican parishes distributed relief.

In 1785, with the enactment of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Virginia's parishes lost this responsibility as the state ceased recognizing an official church. Instead, the poor became charges of county governments. Like parishes, counties provided cash or in-kind payments to poor people living in their homes (a type of aid known as "outdoor relief") and supported almshouses or poorhouses. Some officials believed that counties would save money by providing relief in a centralized location where they could make the supposedly lazy poor labor. They urged counties to insist that the poor enter almshouses for relief. The resulting poorhouses, which were a form of "indoor relief," became more common in Virginia and in other states during the 1790s and early 1800s. Prince William's poorhouse was one of the first ten built by a Virginia county government.

Poorhouses were intended to be Spartan and uncomfortable; living conditions were supposed to convince paupers that only through hard work would they escape the atmosphere of penury. However, overseers were late to realize that few inmates were capable of hard work

During the nineteenth century, almshouses also served as places to which masters sometimes emancipated elderly or disabled enslaved laborers and gave counties the responsibility for their upkeep. These former slaves were representative of the typical poorhouse inmate: most were aged or physically or mentally incapable of working and not idle loafers. By the early twentieth century, healthcare professionals viewed poorhouses negatively, as dumping grounds for the unwanted elderly, "characterized by poverty, disease, and filth."

Poverty and the Economy of Prince William County

Subsistence agriculture dominated the local economy between the 1790s and 1930s. Some residents owned farms, while others worked as tenant farmers or enslaved laborers before the Civil War, or as sharecroppers afterwards. Wealthy planters such as the Blackburns of Rippon Lodge grew tobacco during the 1700s, but by the end of the century most local planters became farmers, replacing soil-exhausting tobacco with crops requiring fewer nutrients, such as corn (maize) and wheat.

Even with the shift from tobacco to other crops, agriculture did not bring economic growth. Between 1790 and 1860, the county's population fell from 11,615 to 8,565, while the state's population grew by nearly 54%. Many people emigrated to new western states and territories. Those who remained supplemented their incomes by selling fish from the Potomac or through operating blacksmith shops or small dry-goods stores.

The Civil War significantly affected Prince William County. Two major battles occurred near Manassas in 1861 and 1862, and a primary route between the capitals of Richmond and Washington passed through the county. High inflation devastated the local economy; extensive troop movements destroyed livestock and crops. Around today's park, small raids and skirmishes occurred along Telegraph Road and near Dumfries.

In the early twentieth century, the county's population remained low; census-takers found only 13,951 residents in 1930. Federal impressions of local poverty were contributing factors in the 1935 creation of Chopawamsic Recreational Demonstration Area by the Resettlement Administration. During the final years that the poorhouse operated near Independent Hill, its neighbors worked on their own small farms and supplemented their incomes through jobs at local military bases.

The Prince William County Poorhouse and its Residents, 1794-1927

In some areas of the United States, nineteenth-century poorhouses housed all sorts of people, from young orphans to the destitute elderly. However, county overseers of the poor distributed cash or in-kind payments to approved (usually, but not always, white) able-bodied poor. They remained in their communities and did not live at the poorhouse. The amount of the allowances varied over time. In 1820, payments averaged $11.40 per year, while in 1860 they were $16.22, rising to $47.42 in 1874. In 1912, individuals on the county's poor list each received about $34.28 per year. Taxes and, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, timber sales, funded these welfare programs.

Most individuals who lived at the county poorhouse were elderly or disabled women without the means (or close family) to support themselves. Individuals applied to the overseers of the poor for admission and only gained entry to the poorhouse if they were deemed to be "worthy poor," people not responsible for their poverty and incapable of improving their own life. Children sometimes lived at the poorhouse for short periods, but the overseers usually apprenticed them to a farmer or tradesman. Most nineteenth-century welfare officials opposed allowing children to live in almshouses and be exposed to the 'idleness' of paupers.

While it always had many more white residents than African-Americans, the poorhouse was racially integrated. However, integration does not imply equality. Records from before the Civil War rarely provided African-American residents the small dignity of listing their surnames. African-American residents were almost always physically or mentally disabled. What happened at the poorhouse during the war that freed the slaves is a mystery; none of its records from 1861 to 1874 survive.

Able inmates, together with a few hired farmhands, grew most of the food for poorhouse residents. However, most residents were unable to work due to age and illness; of the 17 residents listed in an 1858 annual report to the state's Auditor of Public Accounts, only four were healthy enough to work. An onsite superintendent managed the poorhouse; research shows that at least one superintendent, John J. Carter (1865-1928), is buried within today's park boundary.

Archaeological excavations in 2001 found harmonica fragments and pieces of tobacco pipes in the ruins of the poorhouse, suggesting that smoking and music were leisure activities for some poorhouse residents. Medical care came through a contracted local doctor. When poorhouse residents died, the county buried them in the poorhouse's cemetery. A 1996 survey found nearly 30 graves, though only 13 are marked with headstones or footstones. The county also provided coffins for dead poor people not resident at the poorhouse.

The Legacy of the Poorhouse

Today, poorhouses built to coerce the able indigent into working are gone. In Virginia, a system of district nursing homes for chronically ill poor people superseded its almshouses. Several programs created as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, such as Social Security and Medicare, supported (and continue to support) people with low incomes in ways similar to nineteenth-century outdoor relief programs.

In the 1910s, the Virginia legislature considered several bills to consolidate county almshouses into district homes for the indigent elderly. At that time, most county poorhouses had fewer than ten residents and were in remote locations. Their superintendents were poorly trained and did not provide the needed level of medical care. Legislators believed that merging poorhouses into regional facilities would save local governments money by bringing a larger number of needy to one location with a higher quality of care than counties could provide individually. The legislature enacted a law allowing consolidation in 1918.

Prince William County was one of five counties that merged their poorhouses to create the first district home. Together with Culpeper, Fairfax, and Fauquier Counties, and the city of Alexandria, it opened a new residential facility - today known as Birmingham Green - in Manassas on 28 January 1927. After the opening of the district home, Prince William County sold its poorhouse property of 296 acres for $2,000.00.

Resources on Almshouses and Poverty

Many books and articles about poorhouses and poverty relief are available through your local library or accessible via the internet. State libraries and county governments may have primary sources. Some materials with additional information include:

Bernhard, Virginia. "Poverty and the Social Order in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 85:2 (April, 1977): 141-155.

Crannell, Linda M. "The Poorhouse Story." [http://www.poorhousestory.com]. August 2002.

Crothers, A. Glenn. "Agricultural Improvement and Technological Innovation in a Slave Society: The Case of Early National Northern Virginia," *Agricultural History* 75:2 (Spring 2001), 135-167.

Higginbotham, Peter. "History of the Workhouse." [http://www.workhouses.org.uk]. August 2002.

James, Arthur W. *Back from "Over the Hill": The Disappearance of the County Almshouse in Virginia*. Richmond: State Board of Public Welfare, 1926.

Katz, Michael B. *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*. Rev. ed. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Kirkwood, Robert H. *"Fit Surroundings": District Homes Replace County Almshouses in Virginia*. Richmond: Department of Public Welfare, 1948.

Klebaner, Benjamin J. "Public Poor Relief in America 1790-1860." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1952.

Kulikoff, Allan. *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.

Rothman, David J. *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*. 2d. ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990.

Trattner, Walter I. *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*. 6th. ed. New York: Free Press, 1999.

Watkinson, James D. "Rogues, Vagabonds, and Fit Objects: The Treatment of the Poor in Antebellum Virginia," *Virginia Cavalcade* 49:1 (Winter 2000), 16-29.